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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NEW DELHI 000007

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SUBJECT: CODEL VOINOVICH MEETING WITH PM SINGH

Classified By: A/DCM George Deikun for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary. In a December 29 meeting with Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Codel Voinovich (consisting of Senator Voinovich, and Congressmen Turner, Gingrey, Pearce and Bishop) expressed appreciation for the Prime Minister's leadership in bringing U.S.-India relations to new heights. Senator Voinovich pushed for the conclusion of the 123 Agreement and the civil-nuclear initiative. Members urged the Indian government to take on a more positive, leadership role in promoting reconciliation and democracy in Burma, and in assuring Iran does not seek to develop weapons of mass destruction. They also pressed for greater defense cooperation, freedom from religious persecution of Christians, and collaboration in the war on terrorism. PM Singh praised the U.S. Congress for its role in enhancing the bilateral relationship, described India's economic revolution, reiterated his desire to conclude the civ-nuke deal, explained India's similar objectives in Burma and Iran -- even if tactics on how to achieve those objectives differ, offered assurances that religious tolerance is a pillar of Indian society, and said he welcomed closer military cooperation. There were also discussions on India-Pakistan relations in the wake of the assassination of Prime Minister Bhutto, the political phenomenon of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, India-Russia relations and democracy in Russia, India's development, energy security and the environment. End Summary.

India "On the Move"

¶2. (C) Prime Minister Manmohan Singh began the December 29 meeting with Senator Voinovich and Congressmen Turner, Peace, Gingrey, and Bishop by expressing his personal gratitude to the Senator and to the U.S. Congress for its work on the civil-nuclear initiative and friendship to India. Describing India as "on the move," the Prime Minister listed India's recent achievements, including a gross domestic product growth rate of around 9 percent and a domestic savings rate around 35 percent of GDP. Saying his goal is for a GDP growth rate around 10 percent over the next 10 years, PM Singh stated his government is trying to create an environment which will widen India's options for future development. He noted that mass poverty still affects a large segment of the population, but that strong democratic

institutions and stability should enable India to create environment for growth. India will rely on the goodwill of the international community, particularly the United States, with whom India has made a determined effort to improve relations during the last three years, he said.

13. (C) Senator Voinovich noted that he and the Prime Minister had met while he was Governor of Ohio, which PM Singh said he recalled, then praised PM Singh for his leadership during a time when relations are the best they have ever been. He stated that he and his colleagues in the U.S. Congress desired to work with the Indian government to make relations even stronger.

India-Pakistan Post-Bhutto

14. (C) Turning to the assassination of Benazir Bhutto and events in Pakistan, PM Singh said India is deeply saddened by Bhutto's demise, however, India has been deeply engaged with Pakistan in recent years to attempt to resolve outstanding issues, and is committed to better relations with Pakistan. The bilateral process slowed since Pakistan's internal political problems swelled beginning in February 2007, but India's desire to live in peace with its neighbor continues. "I have often said I believe our destinies are linked," PM Singh stated. Pakistan is going through "a difficult phase," he said, and no one can predict how the situation there will evolve. PM Singh described three pillar institutions existing in Pakistan as the army, which remains cohesive at this point; the political parties, which are weakened and not allowed to freely function; and civil society, which is still

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underdeveloped. Until all three pillars can work with dedicated cohesion for the interests of the country, PM Singh said he did not see how Pakistan will evolve. The international community should work to strengthen the political process in Pakistan, he opined. India had welcomed the return to Pakistan of Bhutto and Nawaz Sharif, however past elections were not free. What is clear in Pakistani elections is that the Pakistani people do not approve of extremist groups, he explained.

The Modi Phenomenon

15. (C) In response to the Senator's question regarding the recent political success of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister stated that while it was true that Modi and his nationalistic style were popular in Gujarat, the Indian people overall value secularism, equal rights, the rule of law and fundamental human freedoms. He added these values were "gifts our leaders learned from studying the U.S. constitution."

Civil-Nuclear Agreement

16. (C) Senator Voinovich expressed Congress' concern over whether there is the political support in India to complete the 123 Agreement and civil-nuclear initiative. PM Singh replied that India desires this "historic" agreement to go through, and expressed his gratitude to President Bush and the U.S. Congress for the deal. He explained that "some partners" in his coalition government (Note: read: the communist left. End Note.) do not like to see India get too close to the U.S., and while the government believed it had sufficiently debated the deal in parliament and responded to a nine-point list of concerns from its partners, opponents had changed their mindset and continue to oppose the deal. He pointed out that Indian representatives are soon returning to the International Atomic Energy Agency to negotiate an India-specific safeguards agreement, adding he is confident they will be able to reach an acceptable agreement. Referring to his meeting with IAEA Director Mohammad

EQBaradei in October, PM Singh said that El-Baradei had suggested India should have little difficulty completing its safeguards agreement. PM Singh went on to describe India's record on non-proliferation and export controls, stating India wants a strong international non-proliferation regime. India had felt the need to conduct its nuclear tests "because of the region we're in," he stated, "but there should be no doubt that all parties in India do not want nuclear proliferation."

17. (C) The Prime Minister agreed with Senator Voinovich on the environmental advantages of nuclear energy, and PM Singh said nuclear energy can play a significant role in India's energy security. PM Singh noted how he had mentioned this to President Bush in 2005, and commended the President for offering India the civil-nuclear initiative. India is currently undergoing two revolutions, PM Singh said, one in the growth of modern services, and the second in the transition away from a subsistence economy. In both cases, India will need to reduce energy intensity and install technologies which can fuel growth. Senator Voinovich inquired about the success of the Asia Pacific Partnership, which the U.S. Congress passed in 2005, to which PM Singh replied there had been "substantial progress," and offered cooperation with India to work with developing countries as Congress considers pending environmental legislation. PM Singh said India realizes its global responsibilities on the environment and will play its role.

A Push for Leadership on Burma and Iran

18. (C) India's relations with Burma and India are a concern, Senator Voinovich told PM Singh. Congressman Bishop added that the U.S. looks to India for leadership in the region, adding the United States and India have common interests and

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should work together to find peaceful solutions. The Prime Minister explained that India shared the same objectives with the international community on Burma, and that he personally had told Than Shwe of the need for rapid movement toward national reconciliation and democratization, to include the release of political prisoners and the inclusion of Aung San Suu Kyi and all political parties. India also supports the UN mission to Burma led by Ibrahim Gambari. However, India does not believe that sanctions are effective, he asserted, as in India's experience sanctions do not harm the authoritarian regimes as much as they do the poor and ordinary people. India would encourage more interaction with a broader range of Burmese officials to try to influence them and show them what their country is missing.

19. (C) On Iran, India supports whatever United Nations Security Council resolutions there are, PM Singh claimed, adding "but what you have to recognize is we live in this region." India has several interests in Iran, such as historic ties, 12 percent of its oil imports, 150 million Shi'a Muslims living in India, and a diaspora of around five million Indians living in Gulf Coast countries, whose remittances help India's balance of payments. Iran must honor its Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty obligations, PM Singh said, but the controversy over Iran's nuclear program must be resolved peacefully and through dialogue, preferably through the IAEA. PM Singh admitted India did not have its own intelligence on Iran's nuclear programs or intentions, saying India relies on the IAEA's assessments. He again referred to his meeting with El-Baradei, saying that technology may not be a barrier to Iran's development of a nuclear weapon, but there are political and other barriers to Iran developing an effective nuclear deterrent. Congressman Gingrey cited the findings of the recent National Intelligence Estimate on Iran's nuclear capabilities, noting that Iran could reinstitute its weapons program in a short period of time. PM Singh replied that India did not have its own assessment, but added that IAEA assessments noted there

are gray areas. He later said that he had told Henry Kissinger that Iran is likely seeking recognition from the United States, and that Iran would like a dialogue on energy security, tensions in the Middle East, and other issues. PM Singh believed it would be difficult to find peaceful solutions to the problems in Iraq, Israel-Palestine, or Lebanon without the involvement of Iran.

Greater Defense Cooperation

¶10. (C) Congressman Turner pointed out that the delegation included three members of the Armed Services Committee and said he looked forward to greater military cooperation. The Prime Minister said India was very happy with the increase in joint exercises, particularly large-scale ones. India finds the recent defense cooperation to be mutually rewarding, and the Prime Minister agreed with Congressman Turner's desire to find ways for our militaries to work more closely together.

India-Russia and Russian Democracy

¶11. (C) Senator Voinovich cited India's history of good relations with Russia and noted many people are concerned with the path democracy has taken under President Putin. PM Singh urged not to consider Russia in a mechanistic manner, as each country must be allowed to determine its own route. While India would like to see democracy spread, it has to evolve and cannot be put in some rigid framework, he argued. PM Singh added that Russians he has spoken with feel a sense of accomplishment with Putin, compared with how the country felt under President Yeltsin.

Persecution of Christians and Dealing with Muslim Extremists

¶12. (C) Congressman Pearce brought up the issue of persecution of Christians in India, citing the violence directed at Christians in Orissa in mid-December. He also

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asked how the Indian government balances religious persecution with the handling of Muslim extremists. PM Singh energetically replied that religious tolerance is an important issue to his government. His government took immediate action in Orissa, he said, providing the local government with a rapid reaction force and other security assets. He also had spoken with the Archbishop of Delhi the night before, and had assured him the government was committed to protecting the rights of Christians, as well as all other religions. While he could not promise there would not be incidents in a country of a billion people, he did say "You have my assurance, we will never allow these aberrations to become the norm." He added that India, whose faithful include all the major religions, celebrates its diversity. Dealing with Muslim extremists was "not an easy problem" in a country with 150 million Muslims, he explained, and admitted to concern that extremists may have infiltrated Indian madrasas. He described efforts to strengthen intelligence on extremist groups, and said investigations of recent terrorist attacks have all led to organizations based outside of India.

He hoped that U.S. and Indian intelligence agencies could work closer together to combat terrorism. The Prime Minister admitted Muslims in India often have legitimate grievances of being left behind economically, but the government is taking measures to ensure Muslims are not being discriminated against. The government has also asked Muslim leaders, such as Muslim members of parliament, to impress upon India's Muslim population the need for moderation.

¶13. (U) Codel Voinovich has cleared this message.

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